

Fragment of the Month: September 2018

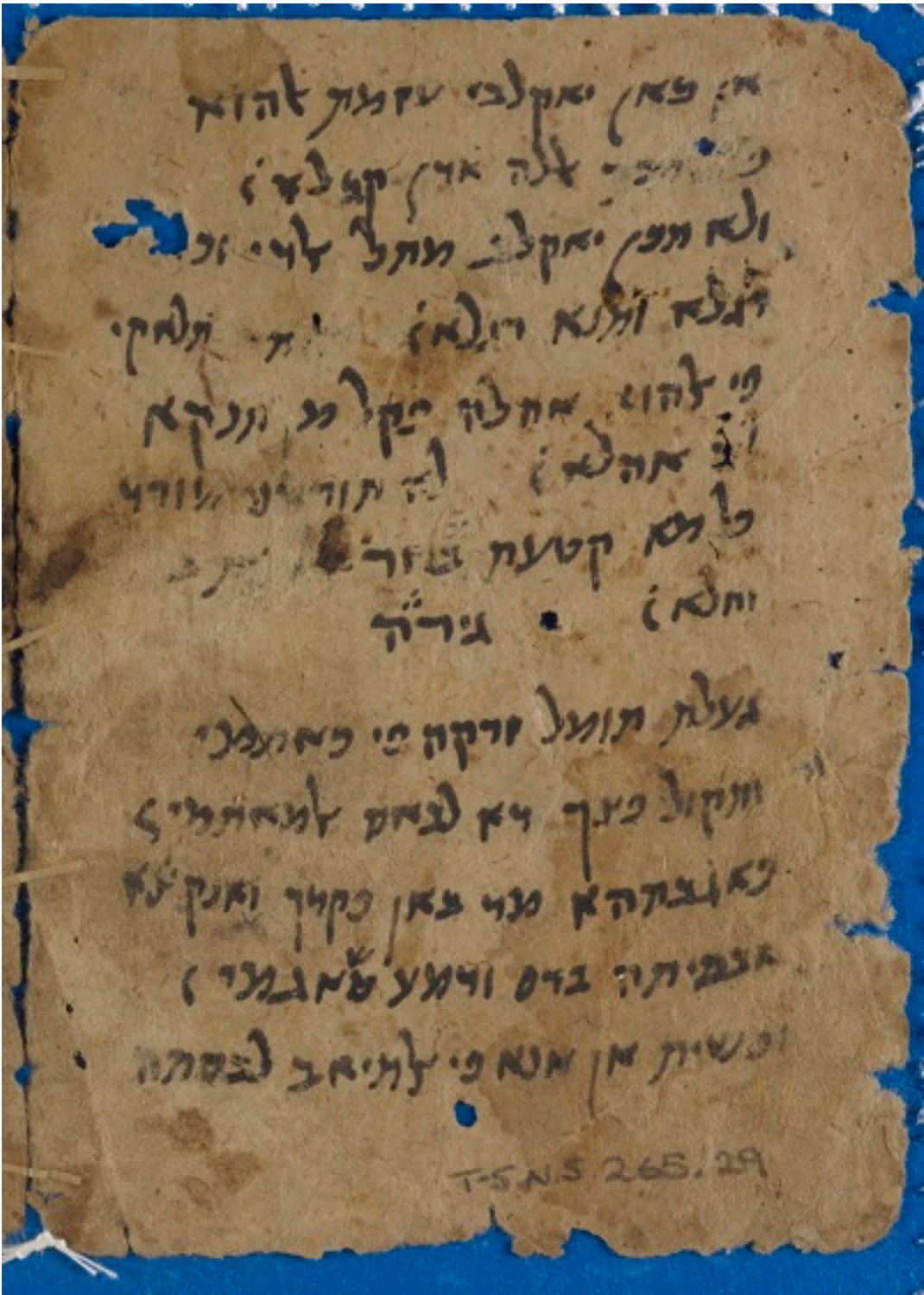
Six Centuries of Arab Poets Transmitted in a Booklet of Judaeo-Arabic Poetry[1]

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While working on my MPhil dissertation at the University of Cambridge, I had the privilege of studying some previously unexamined Judaeo-Arabic poetry in the Cairo Genizah. With the help of Dr Esther-Miriam Wagner, Dr Mohamed Ahmed and the tools available at the Friedberg Genizah website, I discovered a connection between two manuscripts conserved separately: T-S NS 265.29 and T-S Ar.13.2. The join between the two was confirmed when we identified the first line on a folio in T-S Ar.13.2 as the last line of a poem begun in T-S NS 265.29, which is attributed to the tenth century panegyricist popularly known as Kushājim.

In working with these two previously unedited folios we discovered material by a range of authors, most from the ninth and tenth centuries. However, this booklet of poems contains authors as diverse as the pre-Islamic poet Ḥātim al-Ṭā'ī (d. late sixth century), the ninth century renunciant Maḥmūd al-Warrāq (d. 845), the Shiite poet-prince Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī (d. 968), and Ibn al-Nabīh (d. 1222), a composer of praise poetry for prominent members of the Ayyubid court. As with the sampling of authors, the thematic arc of the content is equally broad. These poems range from *ghazals* depicting separation from a beloved to ruminations on the soul and denouncements of wealth in favour of poverty. The booklet of poems at hand is dated to somewhere between the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, which falls within the Classical Period of Genizah manuscripts. The material of the folios (paper), the orthographic conventions manifest therein, and the date range of poets represented in the collection all factor into this estimate.

I would like to highlight a few of the poems contained in these two folios, beginning with the poem by Kushājīm. Kushājīm, formally known as Abū al-Faḥ Maḥmūd ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Shāḥak, worked in the Ḥamdānīd court in Aleppo and is recognized for his contributions to nature poetry. The poem in our folio, however, is neither a panegyric nor a meditation on nature, but rather an esoteric exchange between two speakers involving images of funeral garb, mourning, and a (perplexing) signet ring. The Judaeo-Arabic copy of the poem in TS N-S 265.29 (1v) reads:



T-S NS 265.29 folio 1v

געלט תומל זרקה פי כאתמי

ותקול פצך דא לבאס אלמאתמי:

פאגבתהא מד כאן פקדך ואנקצא

אבכיתה בדם ודמע סאגמי:

וכשית אן אנא פי אלתיאב לבסתה

Translation (my own):

She began to contemplate the blue (gem) of my ring

And says "your gem embodies funeral garb"

And I answered her, since your absence

I wept (for it) in blood and streaming tears

And feared that if I put on the (funeral) robe,

They would realize, so I'm wearing it (his mourning) in the ring.

The Arabic version preserved in the *Diwan* of Kushājim reads: [2]

جَعَلْتُ تَأْمَلَ زُرْقَةً فِي خَاتَمِي	وَتَقُولُ فَصْلُكَ ذَا لِبَاسِ الْمَاتِمِ
فَأَجَبْتُهَا مُذْ مَاتَ وَصْلُكَ وَانْقَضَى	بَكَيْتُهُ بِدَمٍ وَدَمْعٍ سَاجِمِ
وَرَغِبْتُ فِي لُبْسِ الْحَدَادِ لِأَنَّهُ	لُبْسُ الْحَزِينَةِ وَالْحَزِينِ الْهَائِمِ
وَحَشِيتُ إِنْ أَنَا فِي الثِّيَابِ لِبْسُهُ	أَنْ يَفْطِنُوا فَلَبِسْتُهُ فِي خَاتَمِي

The text of the Judaeo-Arabic and that of the Arabic are fairly consistent with each other, with minor linguistic variations. However, the third line of the Arabic text (وَرَغِبْتُ...) is not found in the Judaeo-Arabic edition. The dominant theme of the poem seems to be the man's preoccupation with concealing his mourning, the meaning of which is enigmatic.

Another of the poems copied in T-S NS 265.29 is attested in a collection of verse gathered by the noted Persian anthologist al-Tha'ālibī (d. 1038) known as *Yatīmat al-dahr fī maḥāsin ahl al-‘aṣr*. Al-Tha'ālibī's anthology was innovative as a "geographic survey" of poets, allowing literature to be studied and referenced by "city, region, and court." (Urfah'lī, Bilāl, *The Anthologist's Art: Abū Manṣūr al-Tha'ālibī and His Yatīmat al-dahr*, 29-30.) His structure influenced major anthologies that followed, including *Kharīdat al-qaṣr wa-jarīdat al-‘aṣr*, compiled by ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Kātib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 597/1201).

The poem in our fragments is attributed to Abū Sahl ibn Asbāt al-Kātib, about whom little biographical information is available. The Judaeo-Arabic version of the poem in T-S NS 265.29 (1v) reads:

פ[אסתכר] אללה אדן קבלא:

ולא תכן יאקלב מתל אלדי ו[כא]

רגלא ותנא רגלא: חתי תלאקי

פי אלהוא אהלה פקל מן תלקא

לה אהלא: לא תורדני מורד

כל מא קטעת בחר [...]

וחלא

Translation (my own):

If, my heart, you are resolved to love

Then seek counsel from God first

Oh heart, do not be like the man who extends

One leg and bends the other: So that you may encounter

The people of love, and few are they who find

Them; Do not put me in a place

Where every time I cross an ocean I encounter

A swamp

The version anthologized in al-Tha‘ālibī's collection reads:^[3]

إن كنت يا قلب عزمت الهوى فاستخر الله إذا قبلا

ولا تكن يا قلب مثل الذي قدم رجلاً وثني رجلاً

حتى تلاقي في الهوى أهله وقلما تلقى له أهلاً

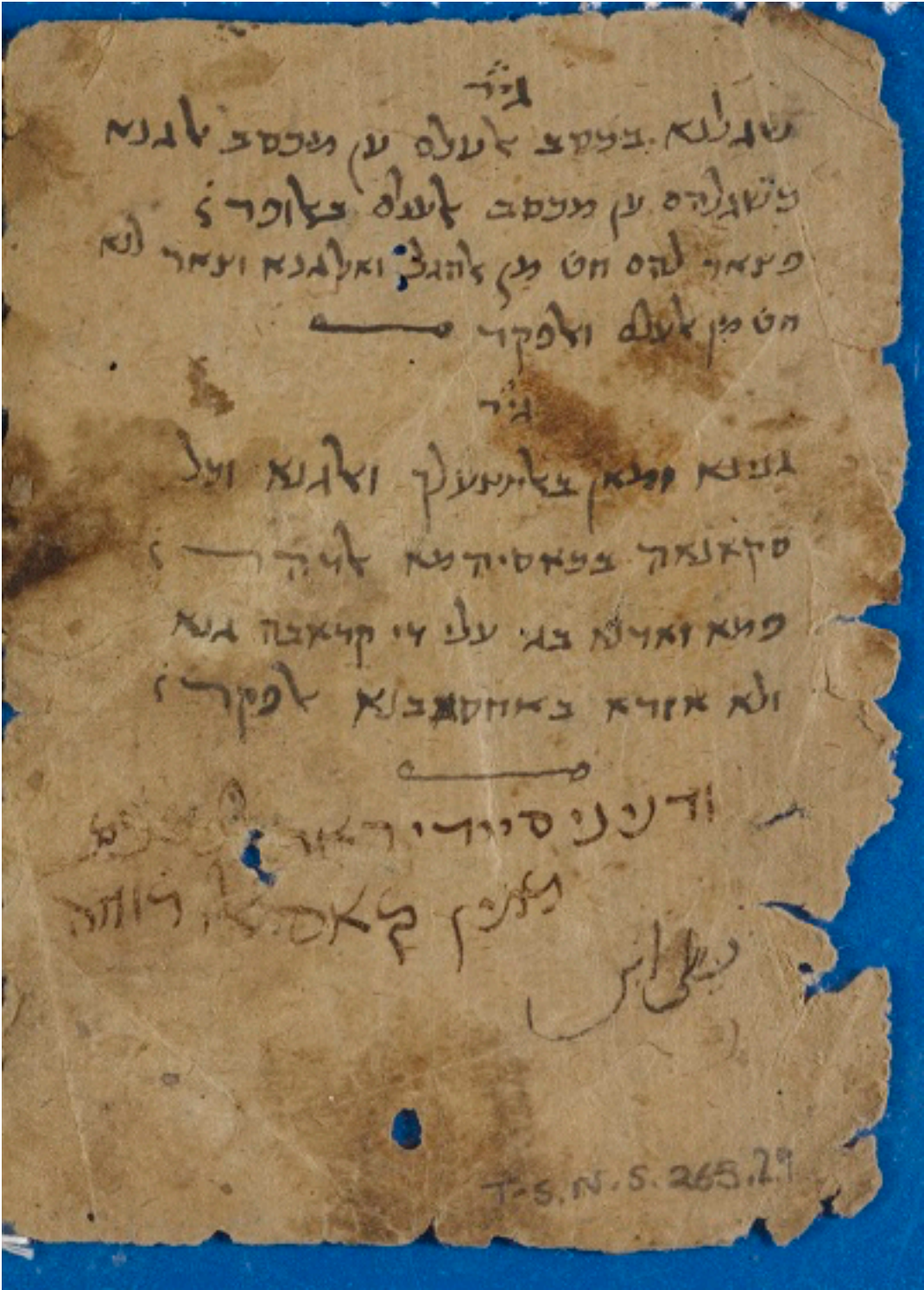
لا توردني مورداً كلما قطعت وحلاً ألتقي وحلاً

The edition in al-Tha‘ālibī is fairly consistent with the Judaeo-Arabic text.

However, a significant lexical variation between the two amounts to the difference between “a sea” and “a swamp”. In the Judaeo-Arabic, the poet pleads: “Do not put me in a place/ Where every time I cross an ocean I

encounter/ A swamp." In al-Tha'ālibī's edition, the speaker crosses a swamp only to find himself in another swamp. Both versions seem plausible, though each yields a different meaning. However, the conclusion in both versions seems to imply a sense of disappointment or possibly futility.

The poem by the pre-Islamic poet Ḥātim al-Ṭā'ī (d. late sixth century) found in T-S NS 265.29 (2v) raises many questions, as it appears to be excerpted from a longer work by al-Ṭā'ī.[4] The full work in al-Ṭā'ī's *dīwān* is comprised of 20 lines; the Judaeo-Arabic edition corresponds to portions of lines 15-17, though with significant lexical variation. It reads:



T-S NS 265.29 folio 2v

גנינא זמאן באלתצעלך ואלגנא וכל
סקאנאה בכאסיה מן אלדהר:
פמא זאדנא בא עלי די קראבה גנא
ולא אזדא באחסאבנא אלפקר:

Translation (my own):

We have spent our time in wealth or poverty—for each

Fate has filled the cup

Our arrogance toward our relatives will not increase because of our wealth

As there is nothing surpassing what we have gained from poverty

The Judaeo-Arabic recension in our folio differs significantly from the corresponding section of the poem in the Arabic of al-Ṭā'ī's *Dīwān*, which reads:
[5]

عُنِينَا زَمَاناً بِالتَّصَعُّكِ وَالْغِنَى	كَمَا الدَّهْرُ فِي أَيَّامِهِ الْعَسْرِ وَالْيُسْرِ
كَسَيْنَا صُرُوفَ الدَّهْرِ لِيناً وَغِلَظَةً	وَكَلَّأَ سَقَانَاهُ بِكَأْسَيْهِمَا الدَّهْرُ
فَمَا زَادَنَا بَأَوْاً عَلَى ذِي قَرَابَةٍ	غِنَانَا وَلَا أَزْرَى بِأَحْسَابِنَا الْفَقْرُ

While al-Ṭā'ī's poem treats various virtues, it is clear that our copyist here was most concerned with those of poverty and modesty. Of all the poems in these two folios, this text seems to most clearly exhibit aspects of recension, providing an example of how Arabic poetry was received among certain members of the Jewish community in High Medieval Egypt.

While the material throughout these folios is diverse, there are patterns of mystical and ascetic elements which surface throughout. In this small sampling of Judaeo-Arabic poetry, we get a picture of what types of Arabic poetry may have been of interest to members of the Cairene Jewish community—and perhaps gain insight into what poetry may have been in broader circulation. Through comparing different editions of the same poetic text we gain perspective into the function or use of such texts among a Jewish readership. As with the lines excerpted from a longer work by al-Ṭā'ī found in T-S NS 265.29 (2v), the omission of various passages amounts to a kind of “Judaized abridgement,” giving us a picture of “how Muslim religious or ethical texts were adapted for Jewish use.”[6] I believe that similar dynamics apply in the context of poetic recensions. In this sense, Judaeo-Arabic poetry in the Genizah may yield insights far beyond the poetic texts they transmit.

Footnotes

[1] I gratefully acknowledge the help of Dr Esther-Miriam Wagner and Dr Mohamed Ahmed, who provided crucial guidance in reading the poetic texts and in searching for the poems in online Arabic poetry collections, at all stages of this project. Their help in the transcription, translation, and interpretation of these verses was indispensable. I am also grateful to Dr Nathaniel Miller for drawing my attention to T-S Ar.13.2 and for his invaluable advice on the poems.

[2] Kushājim, Maḥmūd ibn al-Ḥusayn, *Dīwān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1998), 166-67.

[3] Abū Manṣūr al-Tha‘ālibī, *Yatīmat al-dahr fī maḥāsin ahl al-‘aṣr* vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1983), 519.

[4] See Ḥātim al-Ṭa‘ī, *Dīwān*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1981, 50-51.

[5] Ḥātim al-Ṭa‘ī, *Dīwān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1981), 50-51.

[6] Fenton, “*Kitāb ad-Durr*,” 217.

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